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Partnership for Prevention  
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ProLiteracy Worldwide

## HEALTH LITERACY: STATISTICS AT-A-GLANCE

### *What is Health Literacy?*

- ✓ Health literacy – the ability to read, understand and act on health information – is an emerging public health issue that affects all age, race and income levels.
- ✓ Research shows that most consumers need help understanding health care information; regardless of reading level, patients prefer medical information that is easy to read and understand. For people who don't have strong reading skills, however, easy-to-read health care materials are *essential*.

### *The Scope of Low Health Literacy*

- ✓ The health of 90 million people in the U.S. may be at risk because of the difficulty some patients experience in understanding and acting upon health information.<sup>1</sup>
- ✓ Literacy skills are a stronger predictor of an individual's health status than age, income, employment status, education level, or racial/ethnic group.<sup>2</sup>
- ✓ One out of five American adults reads at the 5<sup>th</sup> grade level or below, and the average American reads at the 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade level, yet most health care materials are written above the 10<sup>th</sup> grade level.<sup>3</sup>
- ✓ Limited health literacy increases the disparity in health care access among exceptionally vulnerable populations (such as racial/ethnic minorities and the elderly).
- ✓ According to the Center for Health Care Strategies, a disproportionate number of minorities and immigrants are estimated to have literacy problems:
  - 50% of Hispanics
  - 40% of Blacks
  - 33% of AsiansMore than 66% of US adults age 60 and over have either inadequate or marginal literacy skills.<sup>3</sup>

-more-

A coalition of national organizations that are working together to promote awareness and solutions around the issue of low health literacy and its effect on health outcomes.

***The Impact of Low Health Literacy***

- ✓ Low health literacy is an enormous cost burden on the American healthcare system – annual health care costs for individuals with low literacy skills are *4 times higher* than those with higher literacy skills.<sup>4</sup>
- ✓ Problems with patient compliance and medical errors may be based on poor understanding of health care information. Only about 50% of all patients take medications as directed.<sup>5</sup>
- ✓ Patients with low health literacy and chronic diseases, such as diabetes, asthma, or hypertension, have less knowledge of their disease and its treatment and fewer correct self-management skills than literate patients.<sup>6</sup>
- ✓ Patients with low literacy skills were observed to have a 50% increased risk of hospitalization, compared with patients who had adequate literacy skills.<sup>7</sup>
- ✓ Research suggests that people with low literacy:
  - Make more medication or treatment errors<sup>6,8</sup>
  - Are less able to comply with treatments<sup>2</sup>
  - Lack the skills needed to successfully negotiate the health care system<sup>4,7</sup>
  - Are at a higher risk for hospitalization than people with adequate literacy skills<sup>7</sup>

***For more information, statistics or research on health literacy, please visit [www.AskMe3.org](http://www.AskMe3.org) or contact Favila Paulos-Budyszewick at 305/520-9024 (e-mail: paulosf@fleishman.com).***

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<sup>1</sup> Kirsch et al, "A First Look at the Results of the National Adult Literacy Survey" Nat'l Center for Education Statistics, 1993

<sup>2</sup> Weiss, B.D. Health Literacy: A Manual for Clinicians. American Medical Association/American Medical Association Foundation, 2003. p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Doak CC, Doak LG, Root JH. The literacy problem. In: *Teaching Patients With Low Literacy Skills*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co; 1996: 1-9.

<sup>4</sup> Weiss, BD, ed. *20 Common Problems in Primary Care*. New York: McGraw Hill. 1999: 468-481.

<sup>5</sup> Center for Health Care Strategies, Inc. *Health Literacy and Understanding Medical Information* Fact Sheet. 1997. <http://www.chcs.org/resource/hl.html>

<sup>6</sup> Williams MV, Baker DW, Honig EG, Lee TM, Nowlan A. Inadequate literacy is a barrier to asthma knowledge and self-care. *Chest*. 1998; 114:1008-1015.

<sup>7</sup> Baker DW, Parker RM, Williams MV, Clark WS. Health literacy and the risk of hospital admission. *J Gen Intern Med*. 1998; 13: 791-798.

<sup>8</sup> Baker DW, Parker RM, Williams MV, et al. The health care experience of patients with low literacy. *Arch Fam Med*. 1996; 5(6): 329-334.